Becoming a European homegrown jihadist: a multilevel analysis of involvement in the Dutch Hofstadgroup, 2002-2005

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8. Individual-level analysis I: Cognitive explanations

8.1 Introduction

In this first of two chapters on the individual level of analysis, the emphasis is on cognitive explanations for participation in terrorism. How can ways of thinking, a person's idiosyncratic perception of events and people, contribute to their becoming involved in an extremist or terrorist group? After a brief explication of the individual level of analysis, the chapter opens by discussing 'radicalization', the most influential cognitive explanation for terrorism to have emerged since the 9/11 attacks. It then moves on to the related concept of fanaticism before turning to how 'cognitive openings' can trigger processes leading to involvement in terrorism. The chapter closes with an appraisal of the roles that cognitive dissonance and moral disengagement can play in bringing about such participation. The next chapter completes the individual-level analysis by utilizing various explanations centered on the idea of distinct psychological traits as contributing to the likeliness of involvement in terrorism.

8.1.1 Structuring the individual-level of analysis

As Crenshaw commented in 1998, 'terrorism is not the direct result of social conditions but of individual perceptions of those conditions'.[784] Similarly, Borum emphasizes that most violence is intentional; a wide variety of factors play a role in bringing it about, but at the end of the day it is still about individuals consciously engaging in this form of behavior.[785] In other words, while the structural and group level factors discussed in previous chapters form an integral part of the puzzle of how and why people become involved in homegrown jihadist entities like the Hofstadgroup, any assessment of this question that does not take the individual-level perspective into account will remain incomplete.

There is a large body of literature that studies terrorism from an individual-level perspective. Fortunately, literature overviews such as Borum's and Victoroff's provide helpful insights into how this mass of explanations can be structured.[786] The present author identified two broad thrusts in this literature; namely, explanations that take a cognitive perspective on involvement in terrorism and those that see it as related to distinct psychological characteristics, such as mental illness. As each of these areas of study contained numerous individual explanations and because

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784   Crenshaw, "Questions to be answered," 250.
785   Borum, *Psychology of terrorism*, 11.
786   Ibid.; Randy Borum, "Radicalization into violent extremism II: a review of conceptual models and empirical research," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 37-62; Victoroff, "The mind of the terrorist," 3-42.

many of them were found to be applicable to the Hofstadgroup, each has been made the subject of a separate chapter.

The study of cognition is 'concerned with the internal processes involved in making sense of the environment and deciding what action might be appropriate'.[787] Victoroff highlights the distinction between cognitive capacity and cognitive style. The first 'refers to mental functions, such as memory, attention, concentration, language, and the so-called "executive" functions, including the capacity to learn and follow rules, to anticipate outcomes, to make sensible inferences, and to perform accurate risk-benefit calculations'.[788] Cognitive style 'refers to ways of thinking – that is, biases, prejudices, or tendencies to over- or underemphasize factors in decision making'.[789] Reflecting the literature on terrorism's focus on this latter aspect of cognitive psychology, this chapter assesses how ways of thinking can contribute to involvement in terrorism (Table 9).

A qualification that needs to be made is that it is not possible to provide a detailed look at every single Hofstadgroup participant. The sources currently available are simply not expansive enough to allow an in-depth reconstruction of the life history, motivations for involvement, psychological state and other relevant personal factors for each and every participant. The available information is also skewed in that relatively more is known about the group's most extremist participants due to the police's greater interest in those individuals. While the two chapters that form the individual-level of analysis draw upon as much data as is available in an attempt to provide insights relevant to the group as a whole, these limitations cannot be entirely overcome.

Individual level analysis I: Cognitive explanations
Radicalization
Fanaticism
Cognitive openings and 'unfreezing'
Cognitive dissonance and moral disengagement

Table 9

8.2   Radicalization

Since the 9/11 attacks, 'radicalization' has become the most widely used explanation for involvement in terrorism.[790] But despite its popularity, the concept suffers from several serious problems that limit its utility.

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787   Michael W. Eysenck and Mark T. Keane, *Cognitive psychology: a student's handbook* (London / New York: Psychology Press, 2015), 1.
788   Victoroff, "The mind of the terrorist," 26.
789   Ibid.
790   Arun Kundnani, "Radicalisation: the journey of a concept," *Race & Class* 54, no. 2 (2012): 7; Mark Sedgwick, "The concept of radicalization as a source of confusion," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2010): 480.

A prime source of confusion is the lack of consensus on what radicalization is. Some scholars[791] and government agencies[792] use it to designate the process leading up to involvement in terrorism. For Horgan, 'violent radicalisation (…) encompasses the phases of a) becoming involved with a terrorist group and b) remaining involved and engaging in terrorist activity'.[793] Similarly, Kruglanski and colleagues see radicalization as 'a movement in the direction of *supporting* or *enacting* radical behavior'.[794] McCauley and Moskalenko view it as 'increased preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict'.[795] Several relatively complex models for involvement in terrorism, such as Moghaddam's 'staircase' and McCauley and Moskalenko's 'pyramid' models have also become subsumed under this interpretation of 'radicalization', even though some of their authors never used this terminology.[796] Essentially, the above authors take a *behavioral* perspective on radicalization; encompassing everything that happens 'before the bomb goes off'.[797]

A second perspective sees radicalization as a process of *cognitive* change which results in the internalization of radical or extremist beliefs.[798] Neumann, for instance, argues that 'at the most basic level, radicalization can be defined as the process whereby people become extremists'.[799] Similarly, Slootman and Tillie, as well as Buijs and Demant, see radicalization as a process centered on the 'delegitimization' of the established societal and political order, leading to a desire for radical change that in its most extreme form could include the use of violence.[800] Horgan contrasts 'violent radicalization' with 'radicalization', the latter signifying the 'social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology'.[801]

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791   Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, eds., *Social science for counterterrorism: putting the pieces together* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2009), xxiv; Dawson, "The study of new religious movements," 4; Donatella Della Porta and Gary LaFree, "Guest editorial: processes of radicalization and de-radicalization," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 6, no. 1 (2012): 5; King and Taylor, "The radicalization of homegrown jihadists," 603.

792   See Danish, Dutch and Swedish government definitions in: Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation," 12.

793   Horgan, *Walking away from terrorism*, 152.

794   Arie W. Kruglanski et al., "The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization: how significance quest impacts violent extremism," *Advances in Political Psychology* 35, no. Supplement S1 (2014): 70.

795   McCauley and Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization," 416.

796   Borum, "Radicalization into violent extremism II," 38-43; King and Taylor, "The radicalization of homegrown jihadists," 605; McCauley and Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization," 416-428; Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism: a psychological exploration," *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (2005): 161-169.

797   Sedgwick, "The concept of radicalization," 479.

798   Randy Borum, "Understanding the terrorist mindset," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 72, no. 7 (2003): 7-10; Greg Hannah, Lindsay Clutterbuck, and Jennifer Rubin, "Radicalization or rehabilitation: understanding the challenge of extremist and radicalized prisoners," (Santa Monica: RAND, 2008), 2.

799   Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization," 874.

800   Slootman and Tillie, "Processen van radicalisering," 24; Buijs and Demant, "Extremisme en radicalisering," 173; Froukje Demant et al., "Decline and disengagement: an analysis of processes of deradicalisation," in *IMES Reports Series* (Amsterdam: Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2008), 12-13.

801   Horgan, *Walking away from terrorism*, 152.

A third set of definitions of radicalization explicitly link beliefs to behavior.[802] Silber and Bhatt argue that radicalization is the 'progression of searching, finding, adopting, nurturing, and developing [an] extreme belief system to the point where it acts as a catalyst for a terrorist act.'[803] Dalgaard-Nielsen sees 'violent radicalization' as a 'process in which radical ideas are accompanied by the development of a willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts'.[804] Neumann writes of 'the process (or processes) whereby individuals or groups come to approve of and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political aims'.[805] Other authors make a more implicit connection between extremist beliefs and involvement in terrorism.[806] The key point is that radicalization is frequently interpreted as a process in which the adoption of radical ideas precedes or even leads to involvement in radical behavior. This implied or explicitly stated connection is radicalization's biggest flaw.

To be clear, none of the authors mentioned in the previous paragraph argue that beliefs alone are sufficient to explain involvement in terrorism. Yet the centrality of this link in 'radicalization' based explanations is difficult to overlook. Indeed, the very term 'radicalization' implies that radical (or as is more often the case 'extremist') ideas are key to understanding terrorism. It is clear the beliefs can play a crucial role in motivating and legitimizing terrorism.[807] Yet by raising beliefs as the key element to understanding terrorism, 'radicalization' often overstates the explanatory potential of this variable while leaving many others underemphasized.[808]

As Kundnani aptly summarizes the problem, 'the radicalization literature fails to offer a convincing demonstration of any causal relationship between theology and violence'.[809] Essentially, the vast

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802 See also: Michael Genkin and Alexander Gutfraind, "How do terrorist cells self-assemble: insights from an agent-based model of radicalization," in *Social Science Research Network Working Paper Series* (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2011), 2; Lorenzo Vidino and James Brandon, "Countering radicalization in Europe," (London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2012), 9.

803 Silber and Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West," 16.

804 Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent radicalization in Europe," 798.

805 Peter R. Neumann, "Prisons and terrorism: radicalisation and de-radicalisation in 15 countries," (London: The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2010), 12.

806 For instance: Amy-Jane Gielen, *Radicalisering en identiteit: radicale rechtse en moslimjongeren vergeleken* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2008), 14; Lidewijde Ongering, "Home-grown terrorism and radicalisation in the Netherlands: experiences, explanations and approaches," in *Testimony to the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee* (Washington, DC: U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, 2007), 3; Louise E. Porter and Mark R. Kebbell, "Radicalization in Australia: examining Australia's convicted terrorists," *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 18, no. 2 (2011): 213; Eteri Tsintsadze-Maass and Richard W. Maass, "Groupthink and terrorist radicalization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 736.

807 Borum, *Psychology of terrorism*, 45-47; Arie Kruglanski, "Inside the terrorist mind: the relevance of ideology," *Estudios de Psicología: Studies in Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2006): 274-275; Kruglanski et al., "The psychology of radicalization and deradicalization," 76-78.

808 Aly and Striegher, "Examining the role of religion," 850, 860; Bartlett and Miller, "The edge of violence," 2; John Knefel, "Everything you've been told about radicalization is wrong," *Rolling Stone*, 6 May 2013; Lene Kühle and Lasse Lindekilde, *Radicalization among young Muslims in Aarhus* (Aarhus: Aarhus University, 2010), 134-135. See also comments by Horgan in: Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization," 878.

809 Kundnani, "Radicalisation," 21.

majority of people with extremist beliefs never act on them.[810] Strikingly, research has also shown that not all those who *do* become terrorists are (primarily) motivated by extremist ideologies.[811] For instance, a study on American Muslims found radical Islamic beliefs to be unrelated with support for terrorism or the conviction that the U.S. was waging a war on Islam.[812] Even Palestinian suicide terrorists are motivated by more than just extremist beliefs.[813] In short, most radicals do not become terrorists and not all terrorists are (primarily) ideologically driven. Another reason for skepticism about the degree to which beliefs motivate behavior is that terrorists' may have *learned* to describe their motivations in ideological terms during their socialization into the group.[814] Such justifications may obscure other motivating factors that could be of greater significance.

The overstated link between beliefs and behavior is the primary shortcoming of 'radicalization' based approaches to understanding involvement in terrorism. Yet there are more reasons why this particular concept is problematic. Some of the more detailed models of involvement in terrorism tend to be quite linear; suggesting a sequential progression through distinct stages that seems an overly neat categorization of a complex reality.[815] As scholars and practitioners have remarked, it is inaccurate to view radicalization as 'a "conveyor belt" that starts with grievances and ends with violence, with easily discernible signposts along the way'.[816] Moreover, empirical data to support these models is often lacking.[817] Finally, the utility of radicalization as a concept is hampered by the inherently subjective nature of how to define what views and behaviors are 'radical'.[818]

For all of these reasons, radicalization has neither been adopted as an overarching explanatory framework, nor as shorthand for the process leading up to terrorism. Its centrality in the debate on terrorism means, however, that it cannot be sidestepped. Previous chapters discussed the

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810   Borum, "Rethinking radicalization," 1-2; Borum, "Radicalization into violent extremism I," 8; James Khalil, "Radical beliefs and violent actions are not synonymous: how to place the key disjuncture between attitudes and behaviors at the heart of our research into political violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 2 (2014): 198-211; McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 219-221; Max Taylor, "Conflict resolution and counter radicalization: where do we go from here?," in *DIIS Religion and Violence* (Copenhagen: Danish Institution for International Studies, 2012), 1.

811   Abrahms, "What terrorists really want," 98-99; Maxwell Taylor and Ethel Quayle, *Terrorist lives* (London: Brassey's, 1994), 37-38.

812   Clark McCauley, "Testing theories of radicalization in polls of U.S. Muslims," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 12, no. 1 (2012): 309. For a critique of this very point, see: Sam Mullins, "Radical attitudes and jihad: a commentary on the article by Clark McCauley (2012) testing theories of radicalization in polls of U.S. Muslims," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 12, no. 1 (2012): 313-314.

813   Ariel Merari, "Psychological aspects of suicide terrorism," in *Psychology of terrorism*, ed. Bruce Bongar, et al. (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 106; Ariel Merari et al., "Making Palestinian 'martyrdom operations' / 'suicide attacks': interviews with would-be perpetrators and organizers," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 1 (2009): 109-110.

814   John Horgan, "From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: perspectives from psychology on radicalization into terrorism," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 81, 86-87.

815   King and Taylor, "The radicalization of homegrown jihadists," 605.

816   Faiza Patel, "Rethinking radicalization," (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, 2011), 9; McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 218-219.

817   King and Taylor, "The radicalization of homegrown jihadists," 615-616; Borum, "Radicalization into violent extremism I," 15.

818   Neumann, "The trouble with radicalization," 876-877.

contents of Hofstadgroup participants' ideological convictions and the manner in which group processes contributed to the adoption of these views. Shared ideological convictions were the group's most important defining characteristic and formed an important part of the 'glue' that held its participants together. What needs to be elucidated here is whether radicalization can explain involvement in the group and, most importantly, why some individuals planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism.

8.2.1 Radicalization and the Hofstadgroup

Cognitive-leading-to-behavioral radicalization appears well suited to explaining the behavior of Van Gogh's to-be murderer. This individual was set on a quest for answers by the death of his mother in 2001 and quickly came to adopt a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.[819] Contacts with like-minded individuals and the middle-aged Syrian religious instructor Abu Khaled strengthened his new identity as a 'true' Muslim and catalyzed a process whereby he adopted ever more radical views.[820] Van Gogh's future assailant kept on radicalizing until he embraced clearly extremist convictions and concluded that violence against those who insulted Islam and its prophet was not only justified, but a personal duty.[821] By actually murdering Van Gogh for blasphemy, the attacker represents a clear case of someone whose extremist convictions both motivated and justified his use of violence.[822]

At first glance, the same appears to hold true for the individual who recorded a threatening video message in 2005. He too adopted extremist views after a negative experience, namely his perception that Muslims were persecuted the world over, and his growing extremism was also mediated by his involvement with like-minded individuals and authority figures like the Hofstadgroup's Syrian religious instructor Abu Khaled.[823] But in contrast to the experience of Van Gogh's murderer, this individual's internalization of an extremist worldview and his involvement in the Hofstadgroup did not immediately lead to the intention to commit acts of terrorism. Instead, he initially wanted to join Islamist insurgencies in Palestine or Chechnya.[824] Only after attempts to reach those regions had failed did this person begin to show an interest in what appear to have been plans to commit terrorist attacks in the Netherlands.[825]

A more important difference is that while Van Gogh's killer appeared to be strongly and singularly motivated by his convictions, this second individual's desire to commit acts of terrorism was at least party driven by a personal desire for revenge. What is known of this person indicates that

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819   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHB03/27: 4040.
820   Ibid., AHA03/20: 861; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 8.
821   Peters, "Dutch extremist Islamism," 145-159; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 1-87.
822   "Verklaring Mohammed B. in tekst."; Peters, "Dutch extremist Islamism," 155-156.
823   A[.], "Deurwaarders," 3-10; A[.], "Deurwaarders van Allah," 32.
824   A[.], "Deurwaarders," 10-11; De Graaf, *Gevaarlijke vrouwen*, 258-259.
825   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/01: 25-26.

he felt a very strong antipathy towards the Dutch justice system and the secret service AIVD.[826] In early 2005, just after his release from custody, police intelligence information indicated he wanted to rectify the '1-0' that the authorities had scored against him.[827] Undoubtedly, extremist convictions played a role in this individual's violent intentions. But the strong hints of a more personal motive already diminish the degree to which 'radicalization' can provide a full explanation for his (intended) behavior. His is a case where it is difficult to assess whether extremist religious views *motivated* his intended violence or *justified* acts he felt compelled to undertake on more personal grounds.

Studying the wider group's involvement through the 'radicalization' lens underlines the problematic link between beliefs and behavior. Despite the fact that most Hofstadgroup participants held a Salafi-Jihadist worldview, the overwhelming majority of them never committed an act of terrorism, nor were they involved in preparations for one. As one of the group's extremist participants recalled, most of his erstwhile compatriots turned out to be 'wannabes'.[828] The only attack to materialize was the murder of Van Gogh and, as previous chapters have detailed, even the *intention* to commit violence was limited to a handful of the group's almost forty participants. Among this minority was one of the interviewees, who recounted that he only began to develop an interest in actually 'doing something' after the murder of Van Gogh made him and his friends feel it was now their turn to prove themselves.[829] While Van Gogh's murderer was guided largely by his extremist convictions, other participants' motives for violence were to a significant extent non-ideological.

What about the notion that the adoption of radical beliefs precedes involvement in radical or extremist groups? This sequence of events did hold true for a number of individuals, including Van Gogh's murderer and the person who in 2003 tried to reach Chechnya with a friend.[830] But in a significant number of cases, increased interest in radical and extremist Islam *followed from* involvement.[831] The experiences of one interviewee were exemplary in this regard, as his initial attraction to the group was not the worldview he encountered there or his own ideological preoccupations, but rather the simple fact that he enjoyed the others' company and friendship. Only gradually did he begin to adopt the worldview espoused by people like Van Gogh's future assailant.[832]

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826   Erkel, *Samir*, 35-40, 199-200, 206-208, 218-219, 227-228, 240-241; Calis, "Iedereen wil martelaar zijn," 3; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHD08/37: 8552.

827   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "PIRANHA," 151, INL105: 8327.

828   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 1," 2.

829   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 27.

830   A[.], "Deurwaarders," 3-11; A[.], "Deurwaarders van Allah," 30-32; Alberts et al., "De wereld van Mohammed B."; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4002; VERD: ; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 20-25; Peters, "Dutch extremist Islamism," 150-151; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 3, "Personal interview 1," 7-9; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 4, "Personal interview 2," 1-3.

831   Vermaat, *Nederlandse jihad*, 169, 181; Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," GET: 18125; 18157; VERD: 19917, 19935, 20012, 20131, 20225.

832   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 5-7.

Finally, what of some radicalization theories' implied determinism, whereby those who radicalize will adopt ever more extremist convictions over time? Again, it appears only partly applicable to the Hofstadgroup. Some participants 'stopped' at a certain level of 'radicalness', for instance by adopting a Salafist interpretation of Islam that did not see the use of violence as legitimate.[833] Three participants appeared to have little or no interest in radical or fundamentalist beliefs altogether.[834] A small number of people also disengaged from the group because they came to disagree with the emphasis on takfir, even though *they had previously supported it.*[835] For the Hofstadgroup's participants, 'radicalization' was neither predetermined to end at the adoption of extremist views, nor an irreversible process.

In short, radicalization is of limited value when it comes to understanding involvement in the Hofstadgroup. Contrary to this concept's central assumption, the vast majority of participants did not act upon the views they held. Conversely, at least two individuals with apparent intentions to commit acts of terrorism were motivated by more than ideology alone. Secondly, the idea that an initial adoption of radical convictions precedes involvement in an extremist group does not match the experiences of all Hofstadgroup participants. Finally, the deterministic nature of some radicalization approaches cannot account for the minority of participants who retained 'merely' radical or fundamentalist worldviews, or even abandoned previously held extremist beliefs. Radicalization's biggest contribution as an analytical lens is that it underscores the heterogeneous and non-deterministic nature of involvement in the Hofstadgroup.

8.3 Fanaticism

Although 'radicalization' is a problematic explanation for involvement in terrorism for a variety of reasons, this does mean that the role that beliefs play in bringing about involvement in terrorism should be dismissed. What is needed is an explanation that allows for a more nuanced understanding of the role between beliefs and behavior. An explanation that meets this criterion is Taylor's concept of fanaticism.

Taylor is careful to stress that fanaticism and 'normal' behavior are different points on the same continuum; the fanatic is not intrinsically different.[836] Instead, fanaticism is understood as behavior that displays 'excessive enthusiasm' for certain religious or political beliefs.[837] According to Taylor, ideologies can influence behavior because they essentially prescribe a variety of rules

833   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," GET: 4018–4020, 4129, 4132, 4146, 4148, 4159; VERD: 20083, 20567; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 98–99.
834   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 19477–19478, 19480, 19597, 19654, 20522, 20535, 20566.
835   Ibid., 01/17: 4002–4003, 4018–4020, 4030, 4062, 4048–4058, 4085–4086, 4092, 4100, 4125–4127, 4129, 4204; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 36–37, 93.
836   Maxwell Taylor, *The fanatics: a behavioural approach to political violence* (London: Brassey's, 1991), 14.
837   Ibid., 34.

that link an individual's current action to distant outcomes.[838] For instance, religious belief can motivate specific behavior by connecting distant outcomes, such as salvation in an afterlife, to daily behavior such as prayer. For the vast majority of people, religious or political beliefs are not the only influence on their behavior. But for the fanatic, 'the influence of ideology is such that it excludes or attenuates other social, political or personal forces that might be expected to control and influence behaviour'.[839]

Fanaticism is a useful concept to identify individuals who are behaviorally very strongly influenced by their beliefs. Taylor's list of ten qualities of fanatical behavior is a useful tool to assist in this process. These are 1) an excessive focusing on issues of concern to the fanatic, 2) a view of the world that is solely interpreted through and based on ideological convictions, 3) an insensitivity to others and to 'normal' social pressures, 4) a loss of critical judgment in that the fanatic is apt to pursue ends and utilize means that seem to run contrary to his or her personal interest and 5) a surprising tolerance for inconsistency and incompatibility in the beliefs held. In addition, Taylor describes fanatical behavior as apt to display 6) great certainty in the appropriateness of the actions taken, 7) a simplified view of the world, 8) high resistance to facts or interpretations that undermine the convictions held, 9) disdain for the victims of the fanatic's behavior and 10) the construction of a social environment that makes it easier to sustain fanatical views.[840]

Fanaticism alone, however, is insufficient to explain violent behavior. Taylor stresses three elements that make it more likely that fanatically held ideological beliefs will lead to violence.[841] The first is millenarianism, or the belief that the world is facing an impending and apocalyptic disaster or change. The very imminence of millenarian beliefs can strengthen their ideological control over individual behavior, as the consequences of the believer's actions are no longer relegated to a distant future. Additionally, some ideologies advocate violent action as a way of hastening the advent of a new world order.[842] The second factor is the totality of ideological control; when there is little to no 'public space' in which the ideology and its alternatives can be freely debated, the ideology's influence over every aspect of its adherents' lives will increase.[843] The third factor is the militancy of the ideological belief itself.[844] Taylor's work provides a nuanced way of understanding how, under certain circumstances, ideological convictions can provide the impetus for violent behavior.

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838   Ibid., 112-113, 269; Max Taylor and John Horgan, "The psychological and behavioural bases of Islamic fundamentalism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 4 (2001): 53-56, 58.
839   Taylor, *The fanatics*, 33.
840   Ibid., 38-55.
841   Ibid., 114, 181.
842   Ibid., 121-158.
843   Ibid., 160-178.
844   Ibid., 114.

8.3.1 Fanaticism and the Hofstadgroup

Taylor's concept of fanaticism is intended as an explanation for individual engagement in political violence. It therefore makes sense to limit this analysis to those persons in the Hofstadgroup who committed, or most clearly intended to do so, an act of terrorism.

Van Gogh's murderer harnessed at least eight of the ten 'qualities of the fanatic' that Taylor describes.[845] From 2003 onward, his life began to revolve entirely around his Salafi-Jihadist based convictions, which became the sole filter through which he interpreted the world. A world that he viewed in dichotomous terms; consisting of 'true' Muslims and their enemies.[846] His abandonment of work and education imply an insensitivity to 'normal' societal pressures and his decision to murder Van Gogh and then claim complete responsibility for it in court appear contrary to his own best interests.[847] The fashion in which he murdered Van Gogh and his statement in court that he would have done the same had family members been the blasphemers, indicate both a high degree of certainty in the justness of his actions and a dismissive attitude towards his victims.[848] Finally, by limiting his social circle to like-minded individuals, Van Gogh's assailant constructed a 'fanatical world' that reinforced and sustained his views.[849]

The individual who, among other things, tried to reach Chechnya and played a central role in 2005's Piranha case, also displayed signs of fanaticism. These included black-or-white reasoning, a preoccupation with ideological concerns and a worldview shaped by his Salafi-Jihadist beliefs.[850] Given these similarities, why did only Van Gogh's assailant act on his convictions? Perhaps this second person was simply apprehended before he could strike. However, the available evidence suggests a different explanation. First of all, this person appears to have been less fanatical in the sense that his beliefs were not the alpha and omega of his existence. Instead, he was primarily motivated by a desire to aid and avenge what he saw as the Muslim victims of Western aggression. His beliefs certainly played a role in that quest, but as mentioned in a previous paragraph, their role may have been to *justify* violence as much as *motivate* it.

Two other explanations for this difference can be gained by considering the three factors that Taylor identifies as making it more likely that fanatically held beliefs will actually lead to violent behavior.[851] As the Salafi-Jihadist views that both men held were clearly militant in content, this factor offers few answers.[852] It is with regard to millenarianism that an important first distinction

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845   Ibid., 38-55.
846   Peters, "Dutch extremist Islamism," 145-159; Buijs, Demant, and Hamdy, *Strijders van eigen bodem*, 43-49.
847   "Laatste woord Mohammed B.," *De Volkskrant*, 9 August 2005.
848   Ibid.
849   Alberts et al., "De wereld van Mohammed B," 6.
850   A[.], "Deurwaarders," 3-11; NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA"; Van San, Sieckelinck, and De Winter, *Idealen op drift*, 46-47.
851   Taylor, *The fanatics*, 113-114.
852   Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi movement," 207-239.

presents itself. Both men believed a global war against Islam was taking place.[853] Yet it is only in the writings of Van Gogh's killer that this struggle takes on an apocalyptic flavor and is presented as the violent apogee of an age-old struggle between the forces of Satan and those of Truth that demands immediate action on the part of 'true believers'.[854] By contrast, in the videotaped threat to the Dutch government and people, arguably the most militant expression of the other individual's views, millenarian motifs are absent.[855]

Taylor's third factor that can lead fanatics to violence centers on the totality of ideological control, which is more likely in societies with limited 'public space'.[856] As chapter six noted, most participants, including extremists like the Piranha group's ringleader discussed here, retained at least some connections to the world outside the group through old friends, school, work or the simple fact that they lived with their parents. Not so in the case of Van Gogh's to-be murderer. He had lived on his own since 2000, quit his part-time job and his studies following the death of his mother in December 2001 and stopped his volunteer work for an Amsterdam community center in July 2003.[857] Gradually he cut off contacts with his old friends and limited his social circle to fellow Hofstadgroup participants.[858] He was '"always at home reading and translating"'.[859] Within these self-imposed confines, the convictions of Van Gogh's to-be assailant could become all-encompassing and ever-present, exerting behavioral control to a degree not found among his compatriots.

Fanaticism is a concept specific enough to be able to explain why merely holding radical or extremist beliefs alone is unlikely to lead to violent behavior. Van Gogh's killer and the Piranha group's main ringleader both held extremist views but only the first acted on them. Fanaticism is able to account for this difference by making the likeliness that fanatical belief will lead to violence contingent on factors such as the totality of ideological control. Fanaticism therefore affords an understanding of how beliefs can lead to violence that is instrumental to explaining the murder of Van Gogh.

8.4   Cognitive openings and unfreezing

Wiktorowicz describes a 'cognitive opening' as a questioning of previously held beliefs, brought on by a sudden sense of crisis that can be economic, social, political or personal in nature.[860] Cognitive openings, or 'trigger events' more broadly, are seen by several authors as factors that can

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853   NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA"; Van San, Sieckelinck, and De Winter, *Idealen op drift*, 48; Peters, "Dutch extremist Islamism," 145, 152-154.

854   Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 3-6; Peters, "Dutch extremist Islamism," 146-148.

855   NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA".

856   Taylor, *The fanatics*, 114, 160-167.

857   Alberts et al., "De wereld van Mohammed B," 1; Chorus and Olgun, *In godsnaam*, 53-58.

858   Alberts et al., "De wereld van Mohammed B," 6.

859   Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 9.

860   Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Joining the cause: al-Muhajiroun and radical Islam," in *The Roots of Islamic Radicalism* (Yale University, United States 2004), 1, 7-8.

kick-start the process by which people come to adopt extremist beliefs and participate in political violence.[861] Once open to new ideas, an individual can become attracted to radical or extremist groups provided there is a sense of 'frame alignment', in which the group's representation of reality matches the individual's experience and preconceptions.[862] The crises which can produce cognitive openings need not be personally experienced. People may empathize with the suffering of others, for instance through televised reporting on war and conflict, and experience 'vicarious deprivation' that can prompt them to reevaluate their convictions or take action.[863]

In a similar argument, McCauley and Moskalenko posit that there is higher chance that people will become involved in terrorism when they are suddenly detached from their everyday commitments and acquaintances. Individuals undergoing such 'unfreezing' become more open to meeting new people and entertaining new ideas. For instance, moving to a new city may prompt people to make new friends or, more dramatically, government collapse might necessitate looking for other means or organizations to ensure personal safety.[864] The unfreezing hypothesis is, in turn, reminiscent of what Munson refers to as 'biographical availability'; his study indicated that a majority of people who became involved in pro-life activism were in a period of personal transition at the moment of contact with the pro-life movement, whereas those who remained uncommitted had stable life situations.[865] Cognitive openings, unfreezing, and biographical availability all suggest that a sudden change or a period of personal transition can make individuals more amenable to becoming involved in activism, radical or extremist groups and even terrorism.

8.4.1   Cognitive openings, unfreezing and the Hofstadgroup

Cognitive openings and the trigger events that led to them played an important role in bringing about participation in the Hofstadgroup. For several individuals, these trigger events were political in nature. As a teenager, the individual who tried to reach Chechnya in 2003 was gripped by news footage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Balkan war. The start of the Second Intifada (2000) led to a burgeoning perception that Muslims specifically were being persecuted the world over.[866] Then he saw the dramatic footage of the Palestinian boy Muhammad al-Durrah and his father being killed after getting caught in a cross-fire between Israeli and Palestinian

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861   B. Heidi Ellis et al., "Trauma and openness to legal and illegal activism among Somali refugees," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 5 (2015): 857-883; Gaetano Joe Ilardi, "Interviews with Canadian radicals," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 9 (2013): 726-727; Porter and Kebbell, "Radicalization in Australia: examining Australia's convicted terrorists," 227; Wiktorowicz, "Joining the cause: al-Muhajiroun and radical Islam," 1; Alex S. Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, "Transformative radicalization: applying learning theory to Islamist radicalization," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 5 (2011): 423.
862   Wiktorowicz, "Joining the cause: al-Muhajiroun and radical Islam," 5.
863   Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation," 26; Andrew Silke, *Terrorism: all that matters* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014), 66-67; Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, 72-75; Sageman, "The next generation of terror," 40-41.
864   McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 75-88.
865   Munson, *The making of*, 37.
866   A[.], "Deurwaarders," 4.

forces.[867] This particular incident triggered a belief that 'Muslims were being wronged' and led him to question whether he should go and help the Palestinian people, 'if necessary by fighting'.[868]

The most influential trigger events of all were undoubtedly the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. These attacks prompted a number of future participants to search for answers about the attackers' motives and Islam's stance on such violence, searches that brought them into contact with political Islam and Salafi-Jihadist justifications for violence.[869] As one future participant described this period; 'I was on the internet so often and so long that I began to lose weight'.[870] In addition, the attacks and the U.S.-led military response they evoked brought about a burgeoning political consciousness. One female participant described being shocked by what she saw as U.S. president George W. Bush's declaration of war against Muslims. This compelled her to choose sides for 'the Muslims' and fueled her interest in Islam.[871]

Trigger events could also be distinctly personal. Van Gogh's murderer's adoption of a fundamentalist and extremist interpretation of Islam was initiated by two events. The first was his imprisonment from July to August 2001 for assaulting two police officers. It seems that this experience engendered a desire to make a fresh start and it was in prison that he began studying the Quran in earnest.[872] The more important trigger event was the death of his mother in December 2001. Van Gogh's future assailant would later write about the influence her death had on him in the farewell letter he left his family: '[i]t has not eluded you that I have changed since the death of my mother. In the wake of her death I have undertaken a search to uncover the truth'.[873] These triggers awakened the 'need for a new spiritual orientation', setting him on a significance quest that, through the mediation of group influences such as the teachings of Abu Khaled, would lead him to religious fanaticism and terrorist violence.[874]

Other future participants were also set on a path towards involvement by similarly eye-opening personal experiences. One man told police that he reoriented himself on his faith two years earlier after coming to believe he was fatally ill.[875] A female participant who was raised a Muslim realized she knew very little about her faith after meeting a Dutch convert. '"The convert laughed in my face, but then invited me to join her to go to the mosque one time. It took a while before I went, but that woman got stuck in my head: *she is Dutch and knows everything about Islam, while I am Muslim and know nothing*. From then on I went every Friday. I would put on a headscarf and it

867   Ibid., 4-6.
868   Ibid., 4.
869   Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 18-19; Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 10-11; De Graaf, *Gevaarlijke vrouwen*, 249.
870   A[.], "Deurwaarders," 9.
871   Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 19.
872   Chorus and Olgun, *In godsnaam*, 51-53.
873   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHB03/27: 4040-4041; Alberts et al., "De wereld van Mohammed B."
874   Peters, "Dutch extremist Islamism."
875   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," VERD: 20242.

felt great! I was so proud!'"[876] This young woman's renewed interest in her faith led her to make the acquaintance of Hofstadgroup participants and from there to become involved in the group herself.[877]

Asked why he considered using violence, an interviewee listed several factors. One of them was his experience of watching a propaganda video. 'And what really actually triggered me, was when I saw a Palestinian woman be mistreated by Israeli soldiers. So that was for me something, and and, and when you also heard that, you know with Islamic songs in the background, and and, and yes, that was very emotional. Because I, I saw actually my mother there in front of me. (…) Yes, that was… Look, when you a, a Palestinian woman, with headscarf, you know, then you see, then she is already something recognizable you know and then you saw her fall on the ground and when she wanted to get up she got a… (…) So that you can, you can see again in the film. And that was emotional. And, and uhh, that was then something that made me think "Fucking Jews", you know.'[878]

With regard to 'unfreezing', there were at least two participants who experienced a marked change in their everyday life prior to becoming involved or turning to (fundamentalist) Islam. One was a young man who could not find the internship he needed to finish his education and suddenly had a lot of time on his hands, some of which he spent at a mosque. There he met a Syrian man who told him that his failure to get an internship was due to unbelievers' hatred for Muslims. This conversation was the starting point of his search for information about (extremist) Islam and led to him being introduced to the Hofstadgroup by the same Syrian man.[879] The second individual was an illegal immigrant from Morocco; it appears that the group took the place of the friends and family he dearly missed.[880]

Cognitive openings and unfreezing constitute essential pieces of the Hofstadgroup puzzle as they can explain how the initial steps towards involvement came about. For a significant number of individuals, their first steps toward participation were initiated by a sudden period of uncertainty in which they were prompted to question their own beliefs and understanding of the world. A process that made them open to and interested in new friends and ideas. Furthermore, the examples of unfreezing illuminate the role that chance plays in bringing about involvement. Had the individual who could not find an internship been successful in his search, it is quite possible that he would never have become involved in the Hofstadgroup. Similarly, would the Moroccan illegal immigrant have become involved in the Hofstadgroup if he had made friends with people who were not interested in radical and extremist interpretations of Islam?

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876   Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 24 (Italics added).
877   Ibid., 24-25.
878   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 2," 10.
879   Ibid., 2-6.
880   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/17: 4049; Chorus and Olgun, *Broeders*, 36-37.

8.5   Cognitive dissonance and moral disengagement

People's opinions are continuously challenged by new information or contrarian views. For instance, a creationist who learns of the theory of evolution may be shocked to see his or her idea that the world was created in a number of days challenged by a completely different explanation. Such experiences can lead to 'cognitive dissonance'; a psychological tension between previously held beliefs and the information or views that challenge them. Cognitive dissonance can also result from a disparity between beliefs and behavior; someone who smokes while knowing it poses a health risk or, closer to the topic at hand, willfully harming or killing others while being aware of the legal and moral prohibitions against such behavior.[881]

The unpleasant psychological tension gets stronger as dissonance increases.[882] People who engage in terrorism and other forms of violent behavior are therefore especially likely to suffer its effects. Without ways in which to rationalize or ameliorate the tension that follows from the breach of legal and moral codes that the commission of terrorist acts entails, such behavior could well remain taboo or unsustainable for any prolonged period of time. As Maikovich argues, it might be the ability to overcome such cognitive dissonance that separates those who do become involved in terrorism from those who remain militant in thoughts only.[883] The following paragraphs look at several strategies for coping with cognitive dissonance and pay particular attention to the mechanism of moral disengagement.

One way of dealing with the cognitive dissonance that may result from participation in terrorism is to justify present actions based on past behavior. If it was right to do something the first time, it cannot be wrong to do it again. If it was justifiable to lend logistical support to a terrorist attack in the past, why should it be wrong to become more closely involved in the execution of the next one? Isn't the person supplying the bomb just as responsible as the one pressing the button? As past actions form the foundations for subsequent ones, this mechanism of dealing with cognitive dissonance through self-justification sets people on a 'slippery slope' that leads to ever greater involvement in terrorist activities. Self-justificatory arguments can also form an obstacle to disengagement, as ceasing this involvement means questioning the moral permissibility of past behavior.[884]

Involvement in terrorism comes at a significant price. Terrorists must deal with the death or capture of their comrades, abandon alternate career paths and live under the continuous threat of being arrested or killed. Over time, the price of involvement can add up to form a 'sunk cost'

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881   Leon Festinger, *A theory of cognitive dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 1-31.
882   Ibid., 16.
883   Andrea Kohn Maikovich, "A new understanding of terrorism using cognitive dissonance principles," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 35, no. 4 (2005): 377.
884   Crenshaw, *Explaining terrorism*, 129; McCauley and Segal, "Social psychology of terrorist groups," 342-343; McCauley and Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization," 419-421; Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation," 22.

that is so high that continued participation is the only way to justify it. As long as the struggle is not abandoned, past sacrifices can still be justified as having been necessary contributions to the achievement of future goals worthy of the sacrifice. Abandoning the cause or group before those goals have been realized would mean accepting that such costs have been incurred for nothing.[885] Thus, when faced with failure or the realization that past sacrifices have been futile, renewed commitment to the terrorist group and its cause can be a (temporarily) effective way of avoiding this very unpleasant form of cognitive dissonance.

A particularly powerful way of rationalizing the use of violence and overcoming inhibitions to harming and killing others is through moral disengagement. Bandura posits moral disengagement as a way of bypassing or selectively deactivating internally held moral standards that prevent inhumane behavior, thereby avoiding the self-condemnation that would otherwise follow when those standards of behavior are breached.[886] Moral disengagement is itself made possible by several factors highlighted in Bandura's work as well as the broader literature on terrorism. These include the availability of moral justifications for violence, the displacement or diffusion of personal responsibility, disregarding or distorting the consequences of violence, blaming the victims and dehumanizing opponents.[887]

Several factors affecting moral disengagement have already been discussed in previous chapters and will not be dealt with in detail here. For instance, it was established that the Salafi-Jihadism based worldview to which the Hofstadgroup's extremist participants adhered, allowed them to see violence as morally justified and necessary. Chapter seven noted that the group had recourse to authority figures that provided them with (implicit) justifications for violence, but none that allowed for a displacement of personal responsibility to occur by ordering attacks to be carried out. Those participants who carried out acts of violence were therefore hard put to obscure their personal agency as a means of overcoming moral obstacles to the use of violence. What remains to be assessed is whether disregard for the consequences of violence, blaming the victims and dehumanization had a hand in bringing about participants' (intended) acts of terrorism.

Disregard for the consequences of violence is a way of avoiding or minimizing personal responsibility for the harm inflicted on others by ignoring or downplaying the damage wrought. It is easier to use violence, for instance, when the results are not directly witnessed such as through the use of remote controlled weapons or when a chain of command distances the individual who orders an attack from those actually carrying it out.[888] By portraying their violence as defensive, in response to provocation or as legitimate retribution, terrorists legitimize their acts by *blaming their victims*;

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885   Della Porta, *Social movements*, 181; Taylor, *The fanatics*, 75-77; Crenshaw, *Explaining terrorism*, 127.
886   Albert Bandura, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement in terrorism," in *Origins of terrorism: psychologies, ideologies, theologies, states of mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 161-165.
887   Ibid., 161.
888   Ibid., 177-178.

essentially arguing that they brought it on themselves.[889] With regard to *dehumanization*, Bandura argues that when a deliberate effort is made to present the other as something reprehensible, dangerous and less than human, natural feelings of empathy wane and personal inhibitions against using violence are more easily overcome.[890]

McCauley and Moskalenko view dehumanization as the result of 'essentialist thinking' which often takes hold among groups or individuals that are in conflict with one another. The first indicator of this way of thinking is over-generalization; for instance, by seeing the violent behavior of individuals as reflecting the 'evil nature' of the entire group, nation or culture they represent. The second tell-tale sign is fear that the in-group will somehow be contaminated by contact with out-group members. Third is the use of derogatory designations for out-group members that essentializes them as inherently evil and frequently denies them even their humanity; for example, by referring to enemies as 'roaches' or 'pigs'.[891] By contrast, when terrorists refer to themselves they tend to use words that convey legitimacy and heroism, such as 'soldier', 'revolutionary' or 'mujahid' (warrior for the faith).[892]

8.5.1   Cognitive dissonance, moral disengagement and the Hofstadgroup

For most of the Hofstadgroup's participants, 'involvement' was limited to attending group gatherings, discussing radical and extremist interpretations of Islam and perhaps spreading such views online. In lieu of involvement in clearly illegal or morally questionable behavior, such as preparations for an actual attack, the likeliness that participants suffered significant cognitive dissonance was small. Their limited degree of involvement also came at relatively low personal cost; commitments outside of the group, such as study or work, did not necessarily have to be abandoned. Although many participants ultimately paid for their involvement with arrest and imprisonment, these costs were arguably not apparent *during* their involvement and thus did not trigger self-justificatory mechanisms that could lead to prolonged or intensified commitment to the group.

Those participants most likely to experience major cognitive dissonance were those who actually planned or perpetrated acts of terrorism. Most notably, Van Gogh's assailant and the individual who tried to reach Chechnya in 2003 and who appeared interested in committing a terrorist attack in the Netherlands in 2004 and 2005. Both men rapidly embraced ever-more extremist views and eventually become involved in (plans for) acts of terrorism. They also incurred costs for their involvement in militancy; Van Gogh's murderer gave up work, study and old friends to

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889   Ibid., 184-185; Borum, *Psychology of terrorism*, 51.
890   Bandura, "Mechanisms," 180-182. For an example of how dehumanization can contribute to violence, see: Adam Lankford, "Promoting aggression and violence at Abu Ghraib: the U.S. military's transformation of ordinary people into torturers," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 14, no. 5 (2009): 394.
891   McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 161-167.
892   Bandura, "Mechanisms," 170; Crenshaw, "The psychology of political terrorism," 398; Loza, "The psychology of extremism and terrorism," 149; Della Porta, *Social movements*, 174-176.

focus entirely on his religious convictions and his new-found circle of acquaintances. The second individual was arrested multiple times in the 2003-2005 period and spent time in prison. Yet despite these outward signs reminiscent of the slippery-slope and sunk-cost mechanisms, there were no indications that either of them utilized such rationalizations. What they did do was rely on various forms of moral disengagement.

Both of these participants availed themselves of ideological justifications for violence. For instance, both referred to Quranic verses extolling the necessity and justness of violent jihad.[893] They also displaced their individual responsibility for violence by portraying their (intended) actions as religiously mandated.[894] Van Gogh's murderer explained his decision to his family by writing that he had 'chosen to fulfill [his] duty towards Allah'.[895] Likewise, the second individual addressed the following words to his family: 'know that this is the right path and that I commit this deed out of fear for the punishment of Allah, the almighty, for he says (…) "If you do not sally forth, He shall punish you with a painful punishment", and out of obedience to Allah, who says: "For you it is mandated to fight, irrespective of how much you dislike it".'[896] In other words, there was no place for *personal* feelings about the use of violence; it simply had to be done.

Neither of these individuals appears to have disregarded the (potential) consequences of their actions. They did, however, consistently blame their victims. Consider this phrase from the videotaped warning message one of them recorded in 2005: 'Sheikh Osama bin Laden (…) sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri (…) [a]nd our beloved sheikh Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (…) have warned you. But you have only committed more injustices, you crusaders. You supported Bush when he uttered his famous word: "Let the crusades begin." I tell you that between us and you only the language of the sword shall apply until you leave the Muslims alone and choose the path of peace'.[897] Van Gogh's assailant uses the same reasoning in his 'Open Letter to the Dutch People'. 'Millions and millions of Muslims have been raped and slaughtered like animals and there seems to be no end in sight. You, as unbelieving Dutch citizens, must know that your government is partly to blame for this. (…) Because the policy of your government is supported by your ballot and they govern on your behalf, your blood and possessions have become halal [permitted] for the Islamic Ummah.'[898]

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893   Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 27-28, 32-45, 50-56; NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA".

894   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHB03/27: 4040-4041; NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA"; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 18, 27-28, 32-33; A[.], "Deurwaarders," 9.

895   Jaco Alberts and Steven Derix, "Mohammed B. schreef meerdere afscheidsbrieven," *NRC Handelsblad*, 30 April 2005.

896   NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA".

897   Ibid.

898   Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 33.

Both men dehumanized their opponents through the persistent use of derogatory religious signifiers. Consider what Van Gogh's murderer told Van Gogh's mother in court: 'I don't feel your pain. (…) Partly because I can't sympathize with you because you are an unbeliever'.[899] Such dehumanization was widespread within the group. Non-Muslims were called 'kuffar' or simply 'unbelievers', underscoring their fundamental otherness.[900] The words 'zindiq'[901] or 'mortad'[902] (both mean apostate), 'munafiq'[903] (hypocrite / Muslim without true faith) and 'mushrik'[904] (polytheist / one who recognizes other authorities than god alone, e.g. democratic governance) were similarly used against 'false' and 'deviant' Muslims.[905] Given that in the group's interpretation of Islam the penalty for apostasy is death, many of these terms carried a very clear connotation; these people deserve to be killed.[906] Another important example of derogatory language is the recurring use of 'taghut' (idolater / idolatry) to refer to leaders, political systems or state institutions that claim authority based on anything other than Sharia law, as an attempt to paint their claims to power as illegitimate.[907]

Ideological justifications for terrorism, the displacement of personal responsibility for violence on divine mandates, blaming victims for the violence visited upon them and the use of dehumanizing signifiers for the group's opponents. All of these mechanisms worked to lower psychological inhibitions to the use of violence and were especially important for the group's most militant participants. The available evidence illustrates that moral disengagement was a key individual-level enabler of terrorist violence. It forms an important factor in the explanation for the group's planned and perpetrated acts of violence by making it easier to consider the use of violence without seeing it as morally reprehensible.

8.6   Conclusion

Although radicalization has become the predominant cognitive explanation for involvement in terrorism in the post-9/11 period, the chapter's findings challenge its explanatory potential

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899   "Laatste woord Mohammed B.."
900   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," 01/01: 123; GET: 4048, 4052, 4092; AHA4003/4020: 1171, 1176-1177, 1179; AHB4003/4027: 4035-4036, 4041; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 27-28, 40, 50; NOVA, "Chatgesprekken Jason W."; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 38.
901   Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 16, appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 40.
902   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHA04/21: 1324-1325.
903   Ibid., GET: 4052, 4085; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 27, appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 22, 40, 50; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 37.
904   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," GET: 4048; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 31, appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 18, 22-23; Groen and Kranenberg, *Women warriors*, 66; NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA".
905   Former Hofstadgroup Participant 1, "Personal interview 1," 2.
906   Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 16; Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi movement," 228.
907   Dienst Nationale Recherche, "RL8026," AHA03/20: 1171, 1177; AHA1109/1126: 3801-3802; GET: 4002, 4026, 4128; Peters, "De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling," 28-29, appendix: Overzicht teksten geschreven of vertaald door Mohammed B., 10-11, 23-24, 34, 40; NOVA, "Videotestament Samir A. - vertaling NOVA".

in numerous ways. Admittedly, Van Gogh's murderer appeared to be a text-book case of radicalization as he was ultimately motivated by his convictions to commit a terrorist attack. The problem is that radicalization cannot explain why the vast majority of group participants who also held extremist views did *not* act on them. Further problematizing the explanatory potential of 'radicalization' was the finding that some participants only adopted radical views *after* becoming involved; disabusing the notion that radicalization precedes such participation. Finally, the findings belied the idea that radicalization is somehow linear or deterministic; some participants held radical views but never developed extremist ones and a small number even turned away from previously held extremist points of view. Radicalization, in short, does not provide a convincing explanation for involvement in the Hofstadgroup.

Fanaticism provided a more nuanced understanding of the link between beliefs and actions. Unlike radicalization, it is specific enough to explain why not all of those who hold radical or extremist beliefs will act on them by making violent behavior contingent on several contextual factors. Although the Hofstadgroup's extremists shared a militant belief system, only Van Gogh's murderer wedded such views to millenarian beliefs that mandated action on the part of 'true believers' to stave off defeat. More importantly, Van Gogh's killer led the relatively most isolated existence of the Hofstadgroup's participants. Significantly less challenged by different opinions encountered at work, school or in family life, the to-be murderer's beliefs came to exert a markedly higher level of control over his behavior. It was this context that allowed his fanatical convictions to lead to fanatical behavior.

The discussion also revealed the important role that 'cognitive openings' and the related concept of 'unfreezing' played in bringing about involvement in the Hofstadgroup. Triggered by a range of events from the 9/11 attacks to a personal loss, many future participants went through a period in which they questioned previously held beliefs, or were suddenly open to new ideas and acquaintances. These experiences were critical in making them interested in radical and extremist interpretations of Islam and the company of like-minded individuals and thus formed a key element in the Hofstadgroup's formation. Unfreezing also drew attention to the role that chance plays in bringing about involvement in extremist or terrorist groups. Had some of the Hofstadgroup's participants not run into individuals interested in extremist interpretations of Islam, it is quite possible they would never have become involved in the group.

The last cognitive individual-level explanation discussed in this chapter focused on cognitive dissonance and the various ways in which it can be managed. Through such mechanisms as attributing the blame for their own violent intentions to the actions of their victims, emphasizing religious precepts that required violence and the dehumanization of opponents the Hofstadgroup's most militant participants were able to prevent debilitating psychological discomfort that could otherwise result from the use of violence. Moral disengagement therefore played an important role in making possible participants' planned and perpetrated acts of terrorism.

These findings have made an important contribution towards understanding involvement in the Hofstadgroup from an individual-level perspective. But they represent only a part of the various explanations that this level of analysis has to offer. The next chapter completes the individual-level analysis by addressing whether explanations based on mental illness, psychoanalysis, personality characteristics and emotional states can yield explanations for involvement in homegrown jihadist groups.